

Article

Towards Inclusive Disability Theology: A Critical Analysis in the Context of the Vision of Synodality

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Abstract

While Disability Theology seeks to address the real and urgent challenges faced by persons with disability, important aspects often remain overlooked. While Disability Theology critically examines the social, structural, and ecclesial exclusion of persons with disability, it can sometimes neglect and even be antagonistic toward other experiences and perspectives that are incongruent or even connected to disability, resulting in a somewhat exclusive and limited theological stance. This gap and other emerging concerns call for a more inclusive and holistic approach to Disability Theology, which embraces not only the welfare of persons with disability but also the fullness of humanity by its vision, affirming the dignity and participation of all individuals regardless of ability. Employing the thematic analysis in the light of the ecclesial principle of synodality, this article contends that Disability Theology must present a hopeful and promising vision that is genuinely inclusive, participatory, and reflective of the entire Body of Christ. Based on review of relevant literature on disability from various perspectives to assess its inclusivity and examining whether the current model of Disability Theology is genuinely inclusive, it is lacking. Consequently, for Disability Theology to address the phenomenon of disability adequately, it must incorporate Pope Francis' synodal approach and content. This endeavor is significant in enhancing the existing model of Disability Theology, steering it toward a more inclusive framework.

Keywords: *inclusivity, person with disability, synodality, theology of disability*

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Introduction

Disability Theology (DT) emerged as a nascent academic discipline in response to the evolving landscape of disability rights, particularly in the United States at the onset of the twentieth century.¹ John Swinton describes DT as encompassing various perspectives and methods that seek to articulate the diverse theological meanings of the human experience of disability.² Within ecclesial contexts, DT calls for a more critical and conscious engagement with the harmful prejudices that pervade many religious communities, particularly ableism and discrimination.

Nancy Eiesland, a foundational figure in the development of DT, who herself had a congenital bone disorder that limited her mobility, has been especially vocal about the debilitating behaviors embedded within many religious institutions. In her influential article *Encountering the Disabled God*, Eiesland recounts a personal experience in which well-intentioned attempts at inclusion instead resulted in her being singled out, with her so-called disability emphasized in a manner that stigmatized rather than dignified her.³ Her work illustrates the importance of moving beyond superficial gestures of tolerance toward genuine theological and structural reform.

DT, therefore, advocates for reshaping religious beliefs and practices related to disability to foster a more inclusive society and Church.⁴ Proponents of DT continue to explore more welcoming theological approaches that promote belonging and justice for persons with disabilities (PWDs). Although there is an increasing engagement from theologians and advocates across Christian denominations,⁵ the discipline still requires forward-thinking approaches to deepen its commitment to inclusivity and ecclesial integration.

A similar concern for inclusion lies at the heart of Pope Francis' vision for a synodal Church. His call to journey together as the People of God includes a clear emphasis on the participation of PWDs. During the United Nations' International Day of Persons with Disabilities in December 2022, Pope Francis reaffirmed this commitment by describing a synodal Church as one that listens, journeys together, and eliminates the divisive mentality of "us and them." Instead, he emphasized the emergence of a unified "us" centered on Christ.⁶ This vision challenges the Church to reevaluate its structures, attitudes, and practices to ensure that no one is excluded from

¹ Talitha Cooreman-Guittin and Armand Léon van Ommen, "Disability Theology: A Driving Force for Change?" *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church* 22, 1 (2022): 1.

² John Swinton, "Who is God We Worship? Theologies of Disability: Challenges and New Possibilities," *International Journal of Practical Theology* 14 (2010): 274. Disability theology addresses not only the experiences of individuals with physical and mental disabilities but also extends its purview to those marginalized by societal biases, thereby categorizing them as disabled, including women, children, the impoverished, and the elderly. Zechariah Duke, "Dissolving Boundaries – An Analysis of Threshold Concepts within Disability Theology," *Journal of Adult Theological Education* 13, 2 (November 2016): 148.

³ Nancy Eiesland, "Encountering the Disabled God," *PMLA* 120, 2 (March 2005): 584.

⁴ Cooreman-Guittin and van Ommen, "A Driving Force for Change?" 2.

⁵ Cooreman-Guittin and van Ommen, "A Driving Force for Change?" 2-3.

⁶ Francis, "Message for the International Day of Persons with Disabilities," (a message delivered during the celebration of the International Day of Persons with Disabilities, Vatican, December 3, 2022), 7, accessed July 1, 2023, <https://www.vatican.va>.

the life and mission of the community. It invites every member, regardless of ability, to contribute fully and meaningfully to the journey of faith.

This research, therefore, proposes to adopt a synodal approach within the framework of DT, guided by Pope Francis' vision. It seeks to answer the central question: *How can Pope Francis' vision of synodality pave the way toward a more inclusive DT?* The study will employ textual analysis as its primary methodology to address this. It will draw from diverse scholarly perspectives to critically engage with and interpret the problem. Through this approach, the study will appraise the legitimacy of its inquiry, considering current research seeking to understand and respond to the lived experiences of PWDs. By advancing DT through the lens of synodality, this research hopes to make a meaningful contribution to this relatively new but rapidly growing field. It envisions more inclusive local parish communities where PWDs are welcomed and actively engaged as essential members of the People of God. Ultimately, a synodal approach to DT offers guiding principles and criteria for how the Church can walk with those often marginalized by society, affirming that the role of the People of God is to embody and implement these principles as part of the Church's mission.

Discussions

Disability as a Human and Theological Phenomenon

Although the term *disability* is a relatively modern construct – emerging only in the 19th century, as Scott M. Williams discusses – this does not imply that the realities it describes are new or that their significance has only recently been acknowledged.⁷ Throughout history, societies have encountered various forms of human limitation – physical, cognitive, and sensory – and have responded to them in diverse ways. Even in the absence of the modern language of disability, communities have long grappled with questions surrounding inclusion, care, marginalization, and the moral and social value of PWDs. In a paper presented at the International Conference on Social Sciences, Languages, and Culture in 2022, Asish Dineshan and Balasubramanian Geetha explain that while the terminology may be recent, the lived experiences and ethical concerns it seeks to name have always been part of the human story.⁸ Recognizing this continuity invites a deeper appreciation of how past attitudes shape present-day understandings and responses to disability.

Disability and Human Identity

One of the consistent themes in DT is the anthropological inquiry into the identity of PWDs. This question is not merely academic; it reaches the heart of understanding human dignity, worth, and participation in community and faith. Recognizing the identity of PWDs challenges the Church and society to move beyond

⁷ Scott M. Williams, ed., *Disability in Medieval Christian Philosophy and Theology* (New York: Routledge, 2020), 2.

⁸ Asish Dineshan and Balasubramanian Geetha, "Concept of 'Disability' – From the Historical Trajectory," in *Proceedings of International Conference on Social Sciences, Languages and Culture* (Alborear Press, 2023), 174.

stereotypes and to embrace the whole humanity and spiritual depth of every person, regardless of ability.

The question of personhood is closely connected to this theme, especially concerning PWDs. In his study of medieval concepts of disability, Scott M. Williams critiques the criteria for personhood proposed by Mary Anne Warren, which suggests that individuals with intellectual disabilities are defective or less than fully human.⁹ Williams finds this perspective deeply troubling and proposes instead a ‘disability-positive view’ of personal identity and morality. This approach affirms that disability is not a deficit but a significant part of a person’s lived experience. It also calls attention to the need for a more inclusive understanding of humanity that confronts societal ableism and the exclusionary assumptions found within academic and intellectual traditions.

For many disability advocates, impairments are not merely physical or medical conditions but are essential to their personal and social identity. Nancy Eiesland and John Swinton strongly argue that disability is integral to the identity of PWDs.¹⁰ From this perspective, the resurrection of the body does not erase disability; instead, the resurrected body retains its marks as part of the person’s full humanity. In contrast, others take a more traditional religious view that all perceived defects will be healed or removed, and the resurrected body will be fully restored and glorified.

These differing perspectives raise crucial theological questions about wholeness, healing, and identity. In this context, a theology of disability becomes indispensable. It invites the Church to reinterpret long-held doctrines critically and compassionately, such as the resurrection of the body, not by diminishing their theological weight but by reimagining them in ways that affirm the full dignity and sacred worth of PWDs. Drawing on Nancy Eiesland’s vision, Lisa D. Powell critiques theological frameworks that often unconsciously reflect ableist assumptions and instead call for interpretations rooted in liberation and inclusion.¹¹ DT should, therefore, reveal embodied difference as a profound locus of divine presence, spiritual depth, and theological insight.

Yet this raises an important question: where can we strike the balance between doctrine and experience? The phenomenon of disability does not demand the abandonment of doctrine, but it does compel the Church to listen more deeply to the voices and lived realities of PWDs. It challenges the Church to construct a theology that accommodates and actively celebrates these experiences as essential to the fullness of human and spiritual flourishing.

Lived Experience and Embodied Theologies

⁹ Scott M. Williams, “Personhood, Ethics, and Disability: A Comparison of Byzantine, Boethian, and Modern Concepts of Personhood,” in *Disability in Medieval Christian Philosophy and Theology*, ed. Scott M. Williams (New York: Routledge, 2020), 84.

¹⁰ Michael M. Waddell, “Thomas Aquinas and the Resurrection of the (Disabled) Body,” *The Saint Anselm Journal* 12, no. 2 (Spring 2017): 42.

¹¹ Lisa D. Powell, “Disability and Resurrection: Eschatological Bodies, Identity, and Continuity,” *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 41, no. 1 (Spring/Summer 2021): 103–4.

Before promoting a more inclusive DT, it is necessary to reflect on whether the lived experience of disability can serve as a credible and meaningful foundation for theological insight. The search for *loci theologici*, the sources or places from which theology draws its knowledge, is not limited to disability discourse. Christoph Böttigheimer, in his effort to validate natural science as a source for theology, revisits Melchior Cano's classical framework of the *domicilia* or "homes" of divine revelation. Cano distinguished between *loci proprii* (proper or internal sources) such as Scripture and apostolic tradition and *loci alieni* (foreign or external sources), including reason, philosophy, and history.¹²

Before Böttigheimer, Edward Schillebeeckx had already clarified Cano's classification by distinguishing indispensable sources – Scripture and unwritten tradition – from interpretative sources like the universal Church, Church councils, the pope, the Church Fathers, and theologians, all of which fall under the *loci proprii*. He also affirmed the value of *loci alieni*, recognizing that theological understanding is shaped not only by revelation but also by human thought and historical experience.¹³

Building on this tradition, the lived experience of PWDs can and should be considered a valid *locus theologicus*. Stephen Bevans supports this perspective, affirming that human experience is not merely a background for theology but a genuine source of it.¹⁴ Wren Radford builds on this by showing how embodiment, particularly the experiences of disabled persons living in poverty, offers rich, often overlooked insights into theology. These embodied narratives challenge traditional theological norms and dominant models of activism that usually exclude non-normative bodies.¹⁵ Instead, they reveal everyday acts of survival, resistance, and care as deeply theological.

By foregrounding the experiences of marginalized bodies, particularly those of PWDs, theology is invited to move beyond abstraction and become truly justice-oriented and incarnational. In doing so, we recognize that revelation is not confined to ancient texts or clerical authority but continues to speak through the living, complex, and resilient bodies of those society most often forgets.

Critique of Dominant Models

One of the key undertakings of DT is to challenge models that are truly limiting to PWDs. Over time, various models of disability – most notably the medical and moral models – have shaped societal attitudes toward PWDs. These models, which will be discussed in detail later, often fail to affirm the full dignity and agency of PWDs. In response, disability thinkers and advocates have developed theoretical models that

¹² Christoph Böttigheimer, "Natural Science as a Modern *Locus Theologicus Alienus*," *Religions* 15, no. 12 (2024): 1445, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15121445>.

¹³ Edward Schillebeeckx, *Revelation and Theology*, trans. N.D. Smith (London: Sheed and Ward, 1967), 246–47.

¹⁴ Stephen B. Bevans, SVD, *Essays in Contextual Theology* (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill Academic Publishing, 2018), 1.

¹⁵ Wren Radford, "My Body Is Where I Exist: Poverty, Disability, and Embodied Resistance as a Theology of Practice," *International Journal of Practical Theology* 27, no. 1 (2023): 62–65, <https://doi.org/10.1515/ijpt-2022-0019>.

move beyond these debilitating paradigms, which tend to reduce PWDs to contexts of liability, dependence, or moral failure.

The religious or moral model, one of the oldest perspectives on disability, views it as a punishment for past or ancestral sins. Severe disabilities are often seen as consequences of grave offenses, leading to ostracism, social isolation, and sometimes violence against individuals and their families. In their out-of-this-world research, Sheri Wells-Jensen and Alyssa Zuber highlight the stigma perpetuated by this model. They explain that communities typically respond to PWDs by distancing themselves and urging repentance.¹⁶ Although many consider this belief outdated, it persists in some modern contexts, severely restricting affected individuals' access to education, employment, and social inclusion.

Building on this historical backdrop, the medical model emerged as another influential perspective on disability. Historically dominant, this model views disability primarily as a medical problem that needs to be cured or managed. Zosia Zaks provides a detailed historical account of the development of this model.¹⁷ It places experts, such as doctors and therapists, in the role of "normalizing" PWDs, who are expected to comply with prescribed treatments; refusal to do so is often regarded as abnormal or pathological. Despite increasing critiques, this scientific and ostensibly objective approach remains widely accepted and continues influencing popular culture.

In contrast to both the religious and medical models, the social model shifts the focus from individual impairments to the broader societal barriers and discrimination that create disability. Influenced by disability rights advocacy and movements such as liberation theology and the 1960s Civil Rights movement, this approach argues that disability arises primarily from inaccessible environments and prejudiced attitudes. Isaac Boaheng illustrates this perspective with examples: a wheelchair user is disabled only when physical spaces are inaccessible; deafness becomes disabling when communities fail to use sign language; and blindness is limiting when necessary accommodations are absent.¹⁸ This model emphasizes that disability is primarily shaped by society's response to impairments and calls for structural changes to promote inclusion. Consequently, most disability advocates align themselves with the social model and seek to expand the concept of disability within this paradigm.

A significant contribution to this conversation is Olutayo Stephen Shodipo's article, "Possible Models of Disability and Their Application in the Pastoral Care Ministry Practices of the Church," where he introduces three disability models: equality, partnership, and emancipatory. These frameworks aim to revitalize pastoral ministry within Christian congregations, particularly for adults with developmental

¹⁶ Sheri Wells-Jensen and Alyssa Zuber, "Models of Disability as Models of First Contact," *Religions* 11, no. 12 (2020): 678, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel11120676>.

¹⁷ Zosia Zaks, "Changing the Medical Model of Disability to the Normalization Model of Disability: Clarifying the Past to Create a New Future Direction," *Disability & Society* 39, no. 12 (2024): 3235–38, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2023.2255926>.

¹⁸ Isaac Boaheng, "Toward a Disability Theology for the Ghanaian Context," *Antropología Teológica* 26, no. 1 (2024): 7–8, <https://doi.org/10.21703/2735-634520242612586>.

disabilities. The emancipatory model emphasizes self-identity, self-awareness, and self-representation by elevating the voices of PWDs.¹⁹ It focuses strongly on justice, equity, and the rights to autonomy, respect, dignity, and worship within the Church. This model seeks to transform ministry dynamics by acting “with” PWDs rather than “to” them, fostering genuine empowerment.

In contrast, the partnership model promotes collaboration between PWDs and various societal groups, such as healthcare providers and religious institutions. By challenging past prejudices and reaffirming the inherent ability of PWDs to participate meaningfully in the Church community, this model encourages parity, camaraderie, and equitable inclusion.²⁰ The equality model, grounded in intersectional and feminist principles, challenges repressive societal structures, addresses disability inequities, and promotes the civil and human rights of PWDs.²¹ It calls for individual empowerment and institutional reform to achieve greater equality and inclusion across all areas of life.

The question remains: is it possible to conceptualize a model of disability that captures the strengths of existing models while addressing their limitations and shortcomings? Chandra Kavanagh shares this vision, arguing that although dominant disability models often exclude specific experiences to preserve their coherence, these limitations do not render the models useless. However, because important aspects of disability are overlooked, a new approach is necessary. Kavanagh proposes a phenomenological hermeneutic method as a critical tool to examine and expand current models by incorporating the experiences that have been marginalized or excluded.²² Concerning my academic inquiry, I envision a balanced and truly inclusive model that legitimizes the valuable contributions of existing frameworks while refining their weaknesses. Such a model would foster a deeper understanding and fuller inclusion of PWDs within the Church and society.

Inclusivity and Disability Theology

As conversations around disability continue to evolve within theology and society, many scholars emphasize the need for a fundamental rethinking of how the Church relates to PWDs. Luca Badetti reflects on the efforts of disability thinkers to develop models that promote a paradigm shift toward full inclusion, not only in the broader public sphere but also within the Church itself.²³ He argues, however, that the Church already possesses the essential resources to be radically inclusive within its very nature. As a servant, sacramental, and hierarchical community of disciples, the Church is uniquely positioned to embody a mission in which the inclusion and

¹⁹ Olutayo Stephen Shodipo, “Possible Models of Disability and Their Application in the Pastoral Care Ministry Practices of the Church,” *Journal of Disability and Religion* 27, no. 2 (2023): 311-14.

²⁰ Shodipo, “Possible Models of Disability,” 314-16.

²¹ Shodipo, “Possible Models of Disability,” 316-18.

²² Chandra Kavanagh, “What Contemporary Models of Disability Miss: The Case for a Phenomenological Hermeneutic Analysis,” *International Journal of Feminist Approaches to Bioethics* 11, no. 2 (2018): 73, <https://doi.org/10.3138/ijfab.2018.01.26.1>.

²³ Luca Badetti, “Approaching Disability: Pastoral History and Practice Analyzed Through the Models of the Church,” *Concilium* 2020, no. 5: 49–51.

empowerment of PWDs are not optional add-ons but core to its identity and pastoral action.²⁴ Nevertheless, despite this potential, many PWDs continue to experience exclusion and discrimination within ecclesial contexts. These persistent challenges are precisely what DT seeks to confront, calling the Church to live more fully into its vocation by recognizing PWDs not as passive recipients of care but as active participants in the life and mission of the People of God.

Moving Beyond Neglect and Ableism in Theology and Practice

There is a saying that goes, “We should not create problems where there are none.” However, in the context of DT, the goal is not to invent problems but to confront the real and pressing issues faced by PWDs. The neglect, injustices, and exclusion they endure are not imagined; they are often deeply rooted in the structures of both Church communities and broader society, to the extent that they risk becoming culturally normalized. Maake J. Masango, in his paper *Neglect of People with Disability by African Church*, exposes how stigma and exclusion are embedded in African communities due to early socialization and limited understanding of disability. He calls for a fundamental shift in both secular and religious attitudes to bridge the divide between those with and without disabilities.²⁵ Similarly, Gail McMahon-Panther and Juan Bornman highlight persistent barriers preventing PWDs from full participation in community life despite social inclusion being recognized as a fundamental human right. This exclusion is especially evident in religious contexts, where Christian congregations often marginalize PWDs.²⁶

In line with these concerns, a study by Maluki et al. on children with disabilities in Malindi Sub-County uncovers various challenges experienced from an early age. These include social exclusion, neglect (especially among girls), and multiple forms of abuse, including physical and sexual harm. Many children lack access to assistive devices due to high costs and minimal institutional support. Poor infrastructure hinders mobility, and many are unaware of their rights, have limited access to healthcare, and suffer from isolation due to stigma and bullying. Education remains inaccessible mainly because of financial limitations, a lack of special schools, and a shortage of trained educators.²⁷ These findings underscore the breadth of social and structural barriers to inclusion.

Often overlooked in DT is the reality that the challenges faced by PWDs also deeply affect their parents, caregivers, and guardians. These individuals usually

²⁴ Badetti, “Approaching Disability,” 51-56.

²⁵ Maake J. Masango, “Neglect of People with Disability by the African Church,” *HTS Teologiese Studies / Theological Studies* 75, no. 4 (2019): 4-5. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v75i4.5631>.

²⁶ Gail McMahon-Panther and Juan Bornman, “Persons with Disabilities in the Christian Church: A Scoping Review on the Impact of Expressions of Compassion and Justice on Their Inclusion and Participation,” *Journal of Disability & Religion* 29, no. 1 (2025): 81, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23312521.2024.2331461>.

²⁷ Loice Mwikali Maluki, Tsawe-Munga wa Chidongo, and Stephen Muoki Joshua, “Christian Response to Challenges Faced by Children with Disabilities: A Case Study of St. Francis Xavier Roman Catholic Church, Malindi,” *Kabarak Journal of Research & Innovation* 10, no. 1 (2020): 50-54.

endure persistent hardships, including poverty, limited access to specialized services, and the burden of social stigma. Many cannot maintain employment due to the full-time demands of caregiving, forcing them to rely on fundraising, loans, or even placing their children in boarding schools. In rural areas, the lack of access to healthcare, education, and essential disability-related information exacerbates their struggles. Communication barriers, such as insufficient training in sign language, further isolate families, while societal stigma may lead to blame, exclusion, and even the breakdown of marriages. Although government assistance is available, navigating these bureaucratic systems is often complicated and discouraging.

Furthermore, many caregivers lack formal training, compromising the quality of care provided.²⁸ These lived experiences demand deeper theological reflection within DT, especially as they reveal how care networks are integral to the life and dignity of PWDs. In this light, Brewer Eberly's reflections, though not directly focused on DT, point to a critical gap in its inclusivity. Eberly underscores the importance of forming compassionate, holistic caregivers through initiatives like "Phronesis," which advocates for parallel communities that foster moral and spiritual formation in medical training.²⁹ His perspective suggests that a truly inclusive DT must also account for those who support and journey with PWDs. An approach that centers exclusively on disability risks becoming ironically exclusionary, overlooking the interconnectedness of those involved in the care and well-being of PWDs. To remain faithful to its purpose, DT must adopt an all-encompassing lens that affirms every person's dignity and spiritual needs, whether disabled or not.

On top of these practical and structural concerns, DT must also confront problematic theological assumptions. Many views labeled as ableist, such as the belief that disability must be eliminated or 'healed' to reflect God's perfection, continue to shape how disability is discussed in Christian theology. For example, Gosbell, in his article *Space, Place, and the Ordering of Materiality in Disability Theology*, discusses two primary viewpoints on the resurrection of the body of PWDs. The retention theory, supported by scholars like Nancy Eiesland, Amos Yong, and Maja Whitaker, affirms that specific disabilities may be retained in the resurrected body as essential to personal identity. In contrast, the elimination theory assumes that disability will be removed, often reflecting ableist assumptions about wholeness.³⁰ Ableism, understood as a belief system or social attitude that privileges non-PWDs while devaluing those with disabilities, usually manifests when non-PWDs reinforce their self-worth through negative beliefs or stereotypes about disability.³¹

Another underexplored issue in DT is the phenomenon of intellectualism. While much has been said about how physically-abled individuals stigmatize those

²⁸ Maluki, Chidongo, and Joshua, "Christian Response to Challenges Faced by Children with Disabilities," 55-57.

²⁹ Brewer Eberly, "Mending the Healers," *The New Atlantis* 26 (Fall 2020): 78.

³⁰ Louise A. Gosbell, "Space, Place, and the Ordering of Materiality in Disability Theology: Locating Disability in the Resurrection and the Body of Christ," *Journal of Disability and Religion* 26, no. 2 (2022): 149-61.

³¹ T. P. Dirth and N. R. Branscombe, "Recognizing Ableism: A Social Identity Analysis of Disabled People Perceiving Discrimination as Illegitimate," *Journal of Social Issues* 75, no. 3 (2019): 786-813, <https://doi.org/10.1111/josi.12345>.

with disabilities, Jill Harshaw draws attention to the reticence surrounding persons with profound intellectual and cognitive disabilities. Their exclusion from theological discourse and church life reflects social neglect and an implicit bias that equates theological agency with intellectual capacity.³² DT must grapple with including those whose ways of knowing and being fall outside traditional paradigms of speech, rationality, or theological articulation.

These realities – the burdens faced by caregivers, the persistence of ableist views in theology, and the marginalization of individuals with intellectual disabilities – remain under-discussed within current DT discourse. This signals the urgent need for a more inclusive approach to DT. It is one that not only affirms the dignity and agency of all PWDs but also expands its framework to include overlooked voices and challenges. Suppose DT is to be truly liberative and ecclesial. In that case, it must remain open to evolving, recognizing gaps, and responding to emerging concerns, ensuring no one is left unheard or unaccounted for in the life of the Church.

In Search of a More Inclusive Disability Theology

DT continues to evolve as scholars and practitioners seek more faithful and inclusive ways to represent the experiences of PWDs within the Church and broader society. Over the past thirty years, various approaches have been proposed to address emerging needs and contribute to the field's development. Notably, Devan Stahl and Leonard Curry underscore the importance of continually evaluating DT's progress. They highlight the enduring influence of early work rooted in bioethics and medicine. They also call for a deeper integration of critical theory to examine issues such as ableism, representation, and imagination. They further urge engagement with themes like identity, vulnerability, marginalization, and ethical responsibility.³³ Interpreting the gospel in light of the lived experiences of PWDs enables DT to remain internally coherent despite its expanding scope. At its core, DT remains a contextual and embodied theology shaped by cultural and experiential realities.

Sarah Jane Barton exemplifies a proactive approach to advancing DT. She examines the contributions of leading disability scholars such as Amos Yong, Hans Reinders, John Swinton, Stanley Hauerwas, and Shane Clifton, as well as constructive frameworks by thinkers like Debbie Creamer, Molly Haslam, and Tom Reynolds. She also highlights memoir-based approaches, such as those exemplified by Frances Young.³⁴ A central concern in Barton's analysis is the neglect of perspectives from individuals with intellectual disabilities. Focusing on Brian Brock's *Wondrously Wounded*, she promotes the methodological approach of "re-membering," which aligns with inclusive theological methods and the lived reality of Christian discipleship.³⁵

³² Jill Harshaw, *God Beyond Words: Christian Theology and the Spiritual Experiences of People with Profound Intellectual Disabilities* (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2016), ePub.

³³ Devan Stahl and Leonard Curry, "Intersections and Methods in Disability Theology: Bioethics and Critical Studies as Dialogue Partners," *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 42, no. 1 (2022): 153–55, <https://doi.org/10.5840/jsce202281663>.

³⁴ Sarah Jane Barton, "Re-Membering Methodology in Theologies of Disability," *Journal of Disability & Religion* 26, no. 2 (2022): 136–47, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23312521.2021.1988883>.

³⁵ Barton, "Re-Membering," 139–41.

Barton acknowledges her perspective as a Christian theologian and emphasizes participatory action research and direct engagement with PWDs, which mirrors this study's commitment to inclusivity.

Similarly, the beliefs and practices of church communities have come under scrutiny for their reluctance to fully acknowledge the lived realities of PWDs, as Raedorah C. Stewart illustrates in her article *Loop, Hook, Pull: Disabled by Design – Creating a Narrative Theology of Disability*. Stewart critiques certain Judeo-Christian scriptures, such as the stories of Mephibosheth (2 Samuel 4) and the blind man (John 9), for contributing to distorted perceptions of disability.³⁶ These narratives, she argues, risk reinforcing marginalization and harmful stereotypes. More broadly, Stewart points to a narrative gap within Church culture that tends to silence or overlook the voices and experiences of PWDs, thereby sustaining systemic prejudice. Drawing on liberation theology, Stewart challenges theological interpretations that associate disability with brokenness or pity. Instead, she affirms the presence of the *imago Dei* in all people, regardless of physical, intellectual, or emotional differences.³⁷ As she powerfully states, “disabled persons are no less blessed while lacking the espoused sensory normalcy – eyes that see, ears that hear, tongues that speak, hands to feel, feet to walk, intellectual aptitude, cognitive behavior, and emotional appropriateness.”³⁸ Her approach reclaims disability as part of the divine image, emphasizing the intrinsic value and dignity of PWDs and inviting a theological reorientation that fully honors their place in the life of the Church.

Stewart further proposes narrative theology protocols to foster respectful, inclusive language and to eliminate ableist overtones.³⁹ Her recommendations include avoiding judgmental assumptions, rejecting derogatory language, and prioritizing physical and communicative accessibility. She advocates for including PWDs in leadership and training initiatives to ensure appropriate accommodations and authentic representation. Though diverse in their approaches, these frameworks are committed to honoring the dignity and lived experience of PWDs and promoting genuine ecclesial inclusivity. Stewart's reflections affirm that while specific biblical texts may appear to marginalize disability, they also contain redemptive possibilities. However, without careful interpretation, they can be misused to justify exclusion.

A feminist approach to DT, articulated by Sinenhlanhla Sithulisiwe Chisale in her article *The Purity Myth: A Feminist Disability Theology of Women's Sexuality and Implications for Pastoral Care*, adds another critical dimension. She examines how purity myths, especially in African contexts, marginalize women with disabilities by drawing on biblical texts such as Leviticus 21:17ff. These myths often result in the exclusion of women with disabilities from religious and pastoral care spaces.⁴⁰ Feminist DT

³⁶ Raedorah C. Stewart, “Loop, Hook, Pull: Disabled by Design – Creating a Narrative Theology of Disability,” *Theology Today* 77, no. 2 (2020): 180–81, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0040573620920673>.

³⁷ Stewart, “Loop, Hook, Pull,” 181.

³⁸ Stewart, “Loop, Hook, Pull,” 181.

³⁹ Stewart, “Loop, Hook, Pull,” 183.

⁴⁰ Sinenhlanhla Sithulisiwe Chisale, “The Purity Myth: A Feminist Disability Theology of Women's Sexuality and Implications for Pastoral Care,” *Scriptura* 119, no. 1 (2020): 4, <http://dx.doi.org/10.7833/119-1-1606>.

challenges the binaries reinforced by these cultural and theological narratives, advocating for inclusion, equality, and the healing strength of women.⁴¹ It critiques societal constructs that marginalize women with disabilities and calls attention to a God who embraces all human experiences, including those shaped by disability.

Samuel George takes a distinctly biblical approach to DT, exploring the relationship between disability, Christ's love, reconciliation, and the Church's mission of unity. He views disability as a disruption in the relationship between the "abled" and the "disabled," comparable to other forms of social discrimination such as racism and sexism. In response, George advocates for a more expansive reading of biblical principles, emphasizing the Kingdom of God. This vision embraces the well-being of all people, regardless of ability, and addresses spiritual concerns and social, political, and economic realities.⁴²

Central to George's theology is the metaphor of the Body of Christ found in 1 Corinthians 12, which portrays the Church as a unified body enriched by its diversity. He argues that true unity is impossible without reconciliation, and that reconciliation is rooted in Christ's love. In this vision, the weaker and more marginalized members are not peripheral but essential to the full health and witness of the Body of Christ.⁴³ Embracing difference, for George, is not merely a matter of inclusion but of vitality and faithfulness to the Gospel. Thus, he insists that PWDs must be actively involved in conversations about reconciliation and unity. He argues that any theological or ecclesial discourse that excludes their voices undermines the very essence of being the Church of Christ.⁴⁴ By amplifying the voices and experiences of PWDs, George advances one of the core aims of DT: to build a Church that is more inclusive and reflective of the diverse body it claims to be.

Cristina Gangemi offers a more imaginative and integrative approach to DT by fostering a dialogue between the philosophical insights of Edith Stein and the theological reflections of John Swinton. Both thinkers emphasize grounding theology in a realistic and dignified understanding of the human person as a unique gift, highlighting themes such as authentic, empathic friendship and the body as a bearer of spiritual identity.⁴⁵ They envision humanity as relational, individuals who are both guests and hosts to one another, reflecting the *imago Dei* within the Church and society. Gangemi moves beyond theological frameworks focused solely on limitation or justice by drawing on Stein's phenomenological method, which introduces a "language of love" that challenges prevailing cultural and linguistic assumptions about how persons with intellectual disabilities experience and know God.⁴⁶ This approach offers

⁴¹ Chisale, "The Purity Myth," 7-8.

⁴² Samuel George, "Christ Love Moves the World to Reconciliation and Unity: A Perspective from Disability Theology," *International Review of Mission* 111, no. 1 (May 2022): 107. DOI: 10.1111/irrom.12405.

⁴³ George, "Christ Love Moves the World," 107-8.

⁴⁴ George, "Christ Love Moves the World," 108.

⁴⁵ Cristina Gangemi, "Ways of Knowing God, Becoming Friends in Time: A Timeless Conversation between Disability, Theology, Edith Stein and Professor John Swinton," *Journal of Disability and Religion* 24, no. 3 (2020): 340. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23312521.2020.1750537>.

⁴⁶ Gangemi, "Ways of Knowing God, Becoming Friends in Time," 344.

new theological insights into vocation, community, and belonging. The dialogue between Stein and Swinton encourages the Church to become a space where unconditional love replaces discrimination and where PWDs are affirmed not only for their differences but for the sacredness of their presence. Gangemi's work thus invites further theological exploration into how Stein's vision can shape a more inclusive and life-affirming framework for DT.

Together, these diverse perspectives reflect a rich and evolving field that bears witness to DT's persistent pursuit of inclusivity, theological depth, and the full participation of PWDs in both ecclesial and social spheres. Yet, there remains a quiet unease: have these efforts truly addressed the fullness of what is needed? The continued presence of gaps and silences invites deeper inquiry and a more expansive theological imagination.

Synodality as an Approach to Inclusivity

Synodality is defined as "the specific *modus vivendi et operandi* of the Church, the People of God, which reveals and gives substance to her being as communion when all her members journey together, gather in assembly, and take an active part in her evangelizing mission."⁴⁷ This concept underscores the dynamic nature of the Church as a community called to reflect the very life of the Blessed Trinity – a communion of distinct persons united in love.⁴⁸ In this divine model, every baptized person, regardless of ability or disability, is gathered into one body that transcends individual differences, much like the harmonious diversity within the Trinitarian community. The designation "People of God" emphasizes each member's inherent dignity and active responsibility to contribute to the Church's life and mission. Considering the gaps identified in the previous discussions, the primary purpose of this paper is to propose a more inclusive approach to DT. I suggest that the paradigm of synodality offers a compelling and theologically grounded framework for addressing these shortcomings. The following discussion draws on various scholarly perspectives to demonstrate the transformative potential of synodality in shaping a more inclusive DT.

Synodality as an Ecclesial Approach

Using synodality to articulate or defend the Church's position on a given matter is not a recent innovation. Several scholars have examined its significance, notably Thomas O'Loughlin, who emphasizes the central role of synodality in the Church's life, especially in light of its ongoing reform movements inspired by the Second Vatican Council.⁴⁹ In his essay *Celebrating Synodality: Synodality as a Fundamental Aspect of Christian Liturgy*, O'Loughlin explores the many dimensions of synodality,

⁴⁷ International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, March 24, 2018, Vatican.va, (accessed November 10, 2024) 6.

⁴⁸ International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, 43.

⁴⁹ Thomas O'Loughlin, "Celebrating Synodality: Synodality as a Fundamental Aspect of Christian Liturgy," *New Blackfriars* 104, no. 1110 (2023): 161.

particularly as manifested in liturgical practice. He challenges the notion that liturgical renewal is marginal, instead arguing that synodality can breathe new life into Catholic public worship. This makes it a vital aspect of the Church's broader rejuvenation.⁵⁰

The discussion surrounding a synodal ecclesiological paradigm within the liturgical context is intimately tied to a broader societal longing for meaningful participation. It underscores the importance of personal significance, shared consciousness, and the mutually reinforcing relationships among identity formation, liturgical practice, and discipleship.⁵¹ O'Loughlin delves into the potential of a synodally-oriented local Church, forecasting transformative shifts in social behavior and advocating for reevaluating the Church's legal and structural frameworks.

In her article *From Change to Transformation: Living Synodality in Ministry with Young Adults*, Tracey Lamont argues that embracing a synodal approach can renew the Church's commitment to youth ministry. However, she observes that many local churches in the United States still fail to recognize the significance of this approach. Rather than relying on superficial solutions or national surveys, Lamont contends that the challenges facing the Church, including racial injustice and the effects of the pandemic, require a holistic and sustained ecclesial response rooted in synodality.⁵² Aligned with postmodern curriculum theory, synodality promotes transformative processes by involving ministry leaders and young adults in a shared journey of discernment and action.⁵³ This dynamic approach cultivates a purposeful, resilient, and forward-moving Christian community, driven by the engagement and leadership of the younger generation.

John William Sullivan further contributes to the synodal discourse by exploring the role of friendship as a defining value in a synodal Church. He provides a compelling account of how friendship can shape ecclesial life by enhancing communication and listening and fostering hospitality, authentic generosity, and empathy. In this context, friendship enables open dialogue, crucial for meaningful listening and inclusive participation.⁵⁴ It also affirms each individual's story and lived experience, advancing the Church's overarching mission of faith formation and communion.

Vincent J. Miller, in his essay on synodality and the Church's sacramental mission, addresses the structural injustices and cultural pathologies generated by contemporary neocolonialism and neoliberal globalization, such as social inequality, racism, and apathy. Miller asserts that these realities, which include exploitation, extraction, and lingering forms of colonialism, must be actively confronted by the Church.⁵⁵ Synodality, in this light, becomes a powerful instrument not only against

⁵⁰ O'Loughlin, "Celebrating Synodality," 162.

⁵¹ O'Loughlin, "Celebrating Synodality," 163-66.

⁵² Tracey Lamont, "From Change to Transformation: Living Synodality in Ministry with Young Adults," *Religion* 14, no. 3 (2023): 314-18, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14030314>.

⁵³ Lamont, "From Change to Transformation," 326-27.

⁵⁴ John William Sullivan, "Friendship and Spiritual Learning: Seedbed for Synodality," *Religions* 14, no. 5 (2023): 598-605.

⁵⁵ Vincent J. Miller, "Synodality and the Sacramental Mission of the Church: The Struggle for Communion in a World Divided by Colonialism and Neoliberal Globalization," *Theological Studies* 83, no. 1 (March 2022): 8-9.

external systems of oppression but also against internal dysfunctions such as clericalism and ethnocentrism.⁵⁶ It envisions alternative structures and relationships that, both in the eschatological horizon and the present moment, embody genuine communion over against exploitative and indifferent modes of being.

Together, these works highlight the indispensable role of synodality in envisioning a Church animated by the spirit of communion, participation, and mission. Synodality emerges not simply as an ecclesial method but as a transformative paradigm capable of renewing the Church's structures, relationships, and ministries to reflect more authentically the inclusive and participatory nature of the Gospel.

Synodality as a Catalyst for Inclusivity

Inclusivity is a fundamental value that must be intentionally and consistently nurtured within the life of the Church. In her article *Beyond Borders: Towards a Theology of Synodality*, Rica Delos Reyes-Ancheta emphasizes that inclusion is not merely a theoretical concept but a lived practice, one that requires continuous, deliberate action to shape enduring attitudes and behaviors.⁵⁷ The call to inclusion, particularly within the Church's journey toward synodality, invites leaders and members to cultivate a community grounded in welcome, active participation, and shared responsibility. This process involves creating spaces where all voices, especially those historically marginalized, such as the unchurched, the poor, and PWDs, are genuinely heard and valued.

Inclusion must become part of the Church's *habitus*, deeply embedded in its structures, rituals, and daily practices. Drawing from Pierre Bourdieu's insights, Delos Reyes-Ancheta underscores that forming inclusive systems is essential in shaping a culture where belonging becomes instinctive and mutual.⁵⁸ She affirms that the Church's collective decisions and future direction must be rooted in authentic listening and relational encounters. Therefore, true inclusion is realized through theological reflection and concrete, intentional structures that embody the synodal vision of "walking together" as one People of God. Without the actualization of inclusion in the Church's life, Delos Reyes-Ancheta's optimistic vision of synodality remains incomplete and unfulfilled.⁵⁹

Similarly, Gemma Tulud-Cruz, in her reflection titled *Synodality, Community, and the Margins*, stresses that the path to a truly synodal Church begins with genuine welcome, active listening, and inclusive engagement of the whole People of God. She recalls Pope Francis' reminder that parishes grow when people feel welcomed and heard, and that the broader realization of synodality depends on how deeply and widely the Church reaches out, not only to the faithful already involved but also to the

⁵⁶ Miller, "Synodality and the Sacramental Mission of the Church," 24.

⁵⁷ Rica Delos Reyes-Ancheta, "Beyond Borders: Towards a Theology of 'Synodality,'" *Scientia: The International Journal on the Liberal Arts* 13, no. 1 (2024): 12, <https://doi.org/10.57106/scientia.v13i1.174>.

⁵⁸ Delos Reyes-Ancheta, "Beyond Borders," 12.

⁵⁹ Delos Reyes-Ancheta, "Beyond Borders," 14.

“nones,” the youth, the disaffected, and especially those on the margins of society.⁶⁰ This inclusive outreach must be met with the faithful’s active participation in ecclesial life. Yet challenges remain. Clericalism and alienation caused by Church scandals have pushed many away or left them indifferent.⁶¹

Nevertheless, the call is to trust the Holy Spirit, who continues to move and breathe in every believer. We must resist passivity and hardness of heart, remaining open to the grace of the present moment and courageous in our hope for the Church’s future. Inspired by Pope Francis and voices like Toni Cade Bambara, Tulud-Cruz urges us to embrace “holy boldness” as we walk with others, especially the marginalized, proclaiming that Christ is alive, hope can rise again, and the Spirit is still guiding the Church into new life.⁶²

Glenn J. Morrison reflects on synodality’s profound theological and pastoral implications through inclusion and discernment. He emphasizes that a truly synodal Church must widen its tent to welcome all, especially women, the poor, and those historically excluded from Church life. The maternal dimension evokes compassion and tenderness, encouraging the Church to adopt a nurturing posture.⁶³ Discernment calls for participatory and open leadership that values the laity’s voice. At the same time, inclusion affirms the dignity of those often marginalized, such as the divorced, LGBTQ+ persons, survivors of abuse, and ex-clergy, calling for their full recognition as part of the People of God.⁶⁴

Together, these three elements form a pastoral framework of care that gives rise to a prophetic voice that listens, sees, and feels with the wounded. This prophetic stance confronts the Church’s past failures of elitism, clericalism, and exclusivity, advocating instead for a spirituality rooted in the humility of confession and the healing power of forgiveness.⁶⁵ Morrison calls for synodality to become not just an event but the Church’s ordinary mode of being, expressed through liturgies, formation programs, and genuine structures of inclusion. Drawing from Scripture and Pope Francis’ *Evangelii Gaudium*, he concludes with a Eucharistic vision: a banquet celebrating the Risen Christ, who invites all the weary and burdened into rest, healing, and communion.⁶⁶ Synodality, therefore, is not merely a method but a movement toward a more loving, participatory, and inclusive Church shaped by prayer, mission, dialogue, and the Spirit’s boundless generosity.

Michele Dillon similarly reflects on synodality, asking whether it can ferment an inclusive Catholicism. For her, synods serve as vital institutional tools for the Church to discern and respond to societal changes. Under Pope Francis, synods have been revitalized and restructured to foster ongoing dialogue between theology and

⁶⁰ Gemma Tulud Cruz, “Synodality, Community, and the Margins,” *Asia Pacific Mission Studies* 5, no. 2 (2023): 23.

⁶¹ Cruz, “Synodality,” 26.

⁶² Cruz, “Synodality,” 26-27.

⁶³ Glenn J. Morrison, “Provocative Synodality and Truth: ‘What No Eye Has Seen, Nor Ear Heard,’” *The Furrow* 72, no. 6 (2023): 431.

⁶⁴ Morrison, “Provocative Synodality and Truth,” 432.

⁶⁵ Morrison, “Provocative Synodality and Truth,” 432-33.

⁶⁶ Morrison, “Provocative Synodality and Truth,” 432.

lived experience, guiding the Church's future path. The Synod on Synodality aims to capture the diverse experiences of Catholics, reflecting Vatican II's vision of an inclusive, participatory Church where the laity share co-responsibility with clergy in addressing internal and societal challenges.⁶⁷ Despite setbacks and uneven implementation of Vatican II's reforms, the Church's commitment to faith-reason dialogue offers hope for renewal. Pope Francis' synodal Church calls for sincere discernment by bishops, clergy, and laity alike. This Synod marks a historic moment by including lay voters, enabling broader participation in shaping outcomes. Though synods lack predetermined results, their dialogical nature encourages sustained engagement with the diversity of Catholic experiences, gradually fostering doctrinal and pastoral growth toward greater inclusion.⁶⁸ Whether this Synod will successfully institutionalize a more expansive theology of inclusion remains to be seen.

These discussions on inclusivity further strengthen my cause to promote synodality as a vital approach toward a more inclusive DT. Synodality not only provides but is uniquely capable of fostering a genuine venue for the inclusive participation of all members of the People of God, especially regarding my subjects, those perceived to have disabilities.

Conclusions

Exploring the three key themes mentioned provides a solid foundation for rethinking DT through a more inclusive perspective. This discussion begins with the ontological and experiential aspects of disability by examining how DT has evolved towards identifying potential gaps in its development. This exploration culminates in a conversation about synodality as both a method for the Church and a pathway toward inclusivity.

To begin with, disability is presented as both a human and a theological reality. This notion not only clarifies the concept itself but also highlights the modern understanding of disability, emphasizing that the language surrounding it has deep historical roots tied to societal attitudes and treatment of individuals with disabilities. According to Williams, there is a need to stress the importance of recognizing the dignity and identity of PWDs and challenge the traditional perspectives that often lead to their marginalization. As such, the Catholic Church is encouraged to critically assess her doctrines, especially those related to personhood, healing, and resurrection, to frame a more inclusive theology that honors the lived experiences of PWDs. This is because the advocates strikingly emphasized that disabilities are not merely impairments but crucial elements of personal and social identity. This insight raises significant theological questions about how the Church can authentically acknowledge and celebrate these experiences within its spiritual community.

⁶⁷ Michele Dillon, "Can Synodality Ferment an Inclusive Catholicism?" *Journal of Law and Religion* (2024): 12–13, <https://doi.org/10.1017/jlr.2024.14>.

⁶⁸ Dillon, "Can Synodality," 13.

Next, examining inclusivity and DT within the Church and society points to the necessity for a fundamental shift towards genuinely embracing PWDs. Scholars such as Badetti argue that the Church has the resources for radical inclusivity. However, many PWDs continue to face exclusion and prejudice, as their struggles often stem from entrenched societal and ecclesiastical norms that cultivate stigma and disregard. The difficulties that children with disabilities and their families encounter underline the urgent need for systemic reform. Furthermore, this conversation calls for broader theological reflections that include both PWDs and their caregivers, ensuring that the notion of inclusivity extends to all individuals within their support networks.

Lastly, proposing the integration of synodality as an essential framework for enhancing inclusivity in the Church highlights the communal aspect of the People of God. It aims to promote a more inclusive approach to DT. This model emphasizes the inherent dignity and active role of all members, regardless of their abilities, while spotlighting the importance of real participation and collective discernment within ecclesial life. Scholars like O'Loughlin and Lamont explore how synodality can breathe new life into liturgical practices and youth ministry, respectively. At the same time, Sullivan underscores the role of friendship in promoting communication and inclusivity, while Miller advocates for addressing structural injustices through a synodal perspective, suggesting that this approach can help combat both external oppression and internal issues within the Church.

Indeed, the exploration of DT and synodality provided us a framework that allowed the possibility for complementing, nay merging, these concepts to achieve true inclusivity, which necessitates both structural and spiritual transformation within the Church and society. This complementarity of DT and synodal framework fosters a deeper engagement with PWDs and inspires a re-examination of beliefs surrounding human identity and dignity. By embracing various embodied experiences, the spiritual community can be enriched, aligning with the fundamental principles of faith. The Church must actively listen to PWDs and recognize that disability is a vital part of the human reality and experience. As such, DT needs to address the realities faced by PWDs and their caregivers, nurturing a comprehensive understanding of dignity and belonging in order to fulfill the Church's mission. Adopting a synodal approach, the Church can enhance dialogue, promote justice, and cultivate a vibrant, inclusive environment reflecting divine communion.

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